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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002041

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: MHP SUCCESS TEMPERED BY HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

REF: A. ANKARA 2036

[1](#)B. ANKARA 2014

[1](#)C. ANKARA 2004

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Kelly Degnan for reasons 1.4
(b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment. Right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) is reflecting on its shortcomings after winning only 14.4 percent of the vote in Turkey's July 22 general election. Their tally was enough to surmount the ten percent election threshold and score 71 seats in parliament (one MHP deputy died in a post-election car accident, leaving the party with 70 seats). MHP's signals pre- and post-election indicate we can expect to see uncompromisingly nationalist opposition to the government, but none of the boycotting that led to early elections. MHP is keeping a leash on its more extreme elements as it sets an initial, more moderate tone under the firm but uninspiring leadership of Devlet Bahceli. End Summary and comment.

Election Reaction: What did we do wrong?

[1](#)2. (C) Despite entering parliament after nearly five years in the cold, MHP members were disappointed by the election results. Commending the election's democratic atmosphere, Devlet Bahceli said the nation had designated MHP to perform the role of opposition, but a close advisor acknowledged to us that the party did not do as well as expected. Disappointment in part reflects wildly unrealistic expectations: MHP had campaigned on the motto "To power, alone!" Newly returned MHP deputy Tugrul Turkes, son of MHP's enduring hero Alparslan Turkes, told us the result was "not what we had desired, but better than nothing."

[1](#)3. (C) MHP votes declined in the heartland, but increased in the Aegean and Mediterranean regions. The party benefited from votes well outside their core; according to a Pollmark poll, nearly 32 percent of MHP's voters do not define themselves as being on the right (or left) of the political spectrum. Riza Kucukoglu, President of the Turkey Retired Officers Association, told us most military members vote for MHP and Republican People's Party (CHP). At the party's first parliamentary group meeting on August 8, Bahceli designated officials to investigate why 85 percent of Turks had not appreciated MHP's policies.

¶4. (C) MHP was well-positioned to surmount the 10 percent election threshold. It augmented its core 5-6 percent of ultranationalist voters by fueling fears and paranoia. MHP rhetoric ramped up anti-American and anti-Armenian sentiment, increased anxiety over Kurds in Iraq and Turkmen in Kirkuk, urged popular disgust with the European Union accession process and fanned public support for right-wing opposition to AKP. Bahceli won nationalist points with regular reminders that Turkish soldiers continue to die at the hands of the terrorist PKK, a message that resonated for Turks well beyond the far-right core.

In Parliament: Constructive participation, strong opposition

¶5. (SBU) Living up to its opposition role in parliament, MHP put forward a candidate for Speaker even though he was certain to fail. All 70 MHP deputies voted for Tunca Toskay, who lost as expected (ref A) but whose candidacy made for a more democratic contest. For the separate election of Vice Speaker, Bahceli reportedly is considering Ertugrul Kumcuoglu, Gunduz Aktan, Deniz Bolukbasi, Faruk Bal, and Meral Aksener (ref B).

¶6. (C) Bahceli has said MHP MPs will attend the upcoming presidential vote, ensuring the required 367 quorum will be present. Deniz Bolukbasi claims that Bahceli wants MHP to attend because he does not want the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) to have to rely on the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP)'s presence to hold the vote for Turkey's highest official. With 341 seats, AKP needs at least 26 opposition MPs to meet the quorum requirement. In

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May, Bahceli strongly criticized as anti-democratic CHP's boycott of the April presidential vote which led to early elections. Our MHP contacts claim Bahceli stands by this view. Istanbul deputy Mithat Melen said MHP's reason for attending will be to vote for its own (unnamed) candidate, but even Bahceli himself acknowledges MHP's presence ensures an AKP victory by the third round of voting. Bahceli confidant Riza Ayhan told us MHP sees FM Gul as a moderate, who does not worry the party (they are less sanguine about Gul's "rigid" wife, although not because she wears a headscarf).

¶7. (C) Chairman Bahceli is careful, however, to send clear disapproving signals on Abdullah Gul, who has all but declared his intention to renew his candidacy. In May, Bahceli said Gul would become a shadow president, guided by PM Erdogan. On August 8, without naming names, Bahceli warned that "continuing on stubbornly out of sterile ambition would not serve the people's dignity or the good of democracy." Should AKP continue "its stubborn and confrontational policies, a new crisis for our country will be unavoidable." He emphasized that the presidential candidate should not leave any doubts about his sincerity and loyalty to the basic values of the Republic -- a comment widely interpreted as aimed at Gul.

¶8. (C) The volatile mix of DTP and MHP parliamentarians -- who apparently will be seated in neighboring blocks in the chamber -- could eventually result in fireworks, but first contact was of a much more constructive variety: unexpected handshakes at the August 4 oath-taking (ref C). Media pundits across the spectrum have heaped praise particularly on Bahceli for contributing to a positive atmosphere and urged a continued atmosphere of compromise and respect. MHP is now compensating for the gesture; at the MHP parliamentary group meeting on August 8, Bahceli said, "We will not turn down outstretched hands, but we will not tolerate bullets fired at our soldiers (Mehmetcik) either."

¶9. (C) MHP's success may create an opening for movement on Turkey's headscarf ban. They will certainly take the

opportunity to push AKP -- which has so far not worked for a change in the law -- to take action on a priority issue for its grassroots. Hakan Albayrak, writing in Yeni Safak, noted that in 1999, MHP promised to resolve the headscarf ban, but was unable to succeed in coalition government. He claimed that MHP's grassroots would support a draft law lifting the ban.

MHP in 2007: Aiming for the Center-Right

¶10. (C) Deputy Chairman Oktay Vural, among others, acknowledged to us that MHP must work to broaden its appeal beyond its far-right base. Bahceli also indicated to the Ambassador in January that this is his goal. In the months before the election, ideological rivals MHP and CHP made gestures suggesting a rapprochement, ultimately mooted by the election results, but indicating MHP's push toward the center.

¶11. (C) Often criticized as uninspiring, Devlet Bahceli has indeed worked to overcome the neofascist party's history of political violence and narrow ultra-right appeal. In the process, he has made enemies within the party. After becoming chairman, he closed down many of the party's extremist youth branches. His speeches caution young members to avoid falling prey to "provocations" while in the enthusiastic service of their country. Mithat Melen worried that MHP would quickly revert to ultrist form without Bahceli's moderating guidance.

¶12. (C) Efforts to broaden MHP's target audience may cost it some of its ultranationalist "credibility." Bahceli, who has come under heavy fire for ineffectual leadership (he oversaw MHP's doomed coalition under Bulent Ecevit and poor performance in the 2002 elections), has fended off bids for the chairmanship from rival Umit Ozdag, among others. In January, six MHP dissenters, led by Bahceli rival and former Culture Minister Namik Kemal Zeybek, defected to the tiny ultranationalist/pan-Turkic/Islamist Grand Unity Party (BBP),

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now represented in parliament by Muhsin Yazicioglu. These departures may ease resistance to Bahceli's center-right path.

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